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AUTHOR Woolbright, Meg
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ABSTRACT

For those in Composition Studies, Kenneth Brufee's social constructionist notion of collaboration has been touted as a panacea for all educational ills. Andrea Lunsford and Art Young have recently endorsed a social constructionist philosophy for writing centers. Lunsford asserts that the best collaborative model is socially constructed and aims for consensus. It goes deeply against the grain of education in America because it rejects traditional hierarchies, according to Young. An attempt to examine the roles of consensus and resistance in the relationship between student and tutor, and to conform to the model of collaboration that relies on "mastery" and "consensus" reveals a problem with this model, as transcriptions of dialogues between tutor and student illustrate. It does not allow the student to effectively voice her resistance to the authority of the tutor and to develop her own authority as a writer. This silencing of the student's resistance renders her powerless. But on one level, the student and her tutor do reach consensus about a detail of the writing process. A view that privileges resistance, that keeps student and tutor talking about their differences until they find "some common grounds for agreement that are sufficiently complex to be agreeable" (in the words of Kurt Spellmeyer) to both parties would be preferable to pretended mastery and assumed consensus. (SAM)

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Social-Constructionist Theory and the Writing Center: A House of Mirrors

Meg Woolbright
The Writing Center
Siena College
515 Loudon Rd.
Loudonville, NY 12211
(518) 885-6662

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For the last ten years or so, those of us in Composition Studies and particularly those of us in writing centers have for the most part bought wholesale the social constructionist notion of collaboration. Although there are various slants on this, I think that by and large Ken Bruffee's view has been our rallying point. According to this theory of collaboration, tutors teach students to "master" "normal" discourse. Bruffee says, "To the conversation between tutors and tutees...the tutor brings sensitivity to the... feelings of peers and knowledge of the conventions of discourse." "Students talk," he says, "in order to reach consensus." Through this consensus, comes "understanding." ("Collaborative Learning" 644-5).

This view of collaboration has been touted by some as pretty much of a panacea for all of our educational ailments. Recently, both Andrea Lunsford and Art Young have spoken in favor of a social constructionist philosophy for writing centers. Although Lunsford

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repeatedly urges caution and a critical analysis of what we mean by collaboration, she also claims that:

> "Collaboration aids in problem finding as well as problem solving; collaboration aids in learning abstractions; collaboration aids in transfer and assimilation; it fosters interdisciplinary thinking; collaboration leads not only to sharper more critical thinking, but to deeper understanding of others; collaboration leads to higher achievement in general; collaboration promotes excellence." (WLN, 3)

About the nature of this collaboration, Lunsford is quite explicit. The best collaborative model, she says, is that which is socially constructed, and whose aim is consensus. Art Young, who also praises the social constructionist model, goes so far as to say that this sort of "collaborative learning environment 'rejects traditional hierarchies' (7) and 'goes deeply against the grain of education in America' (7). Those who espouse collaboration are, he says, 'a subversive group' (9).

But there are others who are not so sure (for a full discussion see for example John Trimbur, "Consensus;" Greg Myers, "Reality;" Min-zhan Lu "Conflict"; Kurt Spellmeyer "Common Ground.") Both Min-Zhan Lu and Kurt Spellmeyer question the very assumptions of Bruffee's social constructionism. Lu questions whether the function of collaboration is for students to "learn" or "master" a

discourse; and whether the function of the collaborative group is to ease conflict and to comfort. Spellmeyer questions not only the "disinterestedness" of Bruffee's consensual knowledge, but what it means to learn and to understand according to this view. John Trimbur and others suggest a refocusing not on Bruffee's consensus but on the articulation of difference. With an emphasis on difference, we acknowledge the primacy of resistance.

I want to examine the roles of consensus and resistance in the relationship between one student and tutor. I won't say much about the participants except that the student is not here of her own free will. In the semester prior to this one, she received an "Incomplete" grade in a required writing class. In order to make up for the "I," she has been "sentenced" to a semester in the writing center.

Here is an excerpt from the first minutes of the first conference.

T: What're we writin' about?
S: Um, ok, for my Reading Drama class he [the teacher] gives us a theme and we have to basically write on the theme....
T: What's the theme?
S: "The end justifies the means"....Basically, I asked him what he wanted...and he said basically what I wanted to do was prove the theme by using one character who influenced the theme the most.

And so that's what I did.

[The tutor reads the paper.]

T: One thing I couldn't figure out. I mean your observations on the play are all right. I just couldn't figure out how they were supposed to be organized. Maybe they do make sense but

S: Umhum, um, well, basically I was just talking about the one character...and I just wanted to show that, how he would go to any means to get his goal, and in this case, his goal was money.

T: Yeah...I mean to me that's the theme "every man has his price."

S: Uhhuh, but that's not right...what it's really supposed to be is "the end justifies the means."

I want to talk about the student here. At first glance, it seems as if she has adequately mastered the conventions of the discourse. She speaks of "proving themes," and of "Using characters who influenced the theme." This is the language of the academy--a language she seems quite comfortable with and in control of. In reality however, her control is an illusion. The illusion of mastery is evident, I think, in the repetition of the "basic" metaphor. In answering the tutor's questions, the student summarizes the progress of her paper thus far: her task is to "basically" write on the theme; she asked her teacher "basically" what <u>he</u> wanted; his reply was that "basically" what <u>she</u> wanted to do was to prove the theme; she explains then, that in her paper, she is "basically" just proving the theme. What's all the fuss about writing? This seems pretty simple.

As something "basic," the writing conveys that which is "known." It is not a means of discovery, but a means of transmission. Writing is a container. The image is a spatial one, one of foundations, of solidity, of a bottom level. It is an indication of the student's sense of control: Figuring her writing as a known quantity, as a solid foundational structure, gives her the illusion of control over it. If the certainty of the "known" is questioned or the level of complexity is raised--if things are "messed up"--she will lose this control. Perhaps the most telling example of this is when the tutor suggests that she is really talking about a theme different from the one she has been assigned. "But," she says, "that [meaning his theme, not her paper] is not right."

In "Refusing to Play the Confidence Game," Sheree Meyer suggests that this student's response is not an anomaly. In requiring our students to write "formal essays," we ask them to assume positions of "acknowledged authorities," positions which require, more than anything else, that they become imposters in a confidence game.

This false sense of control is the myth of writing and talking about writing that this student has been taught. Her power and her concept of herself as a writer are rooted in this institutional desire for closure. She views knowledge as "seamless truth" and as

the property of others.

But in this "basic" metaphor, we also have one site of the student's resistance--to the authority of the teacher, the tutor, her "sentence" in the writing center and the discourse. On one level, her resistance is apparent in the fundamental simplicity of this interaction: This is easy. In fact, it's so easy that there's really no reason for us to be talking at all. Her resistance is apparent in just the language that seems to point to her mastery: It is little more than typically reductive stylized classroom discourse: "Basically, I just wanted to show how he would go to any means to get his goal, and in this case, his goal was money." Her response is evidence of discourse practices of argumentation, of pigeon-hole answers to questions of "What did you want to prove? What is the point of your paper? What is the thesis?" But there are more levels to this resistance: I hear resistance in the fact that she does not let the tutor finish his sentence before she begins; I hear resistance in her stall, "Umhum, um, well," and I hear resistance in the fact that when the tutor asks her to explain her organization, she chooses to answer a different question.

Let's look at the tutor's response. Here is an excerpt from the last minutes of the conference:

T: So then...I asked about what the principle of organization is.

You see, as far as I can see, you just sort of wander through the paper...picking out examples to demonstrate your point....Obviously you're gonna need examples...but they ought to be put together in a way that looks like you deliberately put them in this order. <Uhhuh> So like, you know...I'd say well, there are four main places, or four main things which lead me to say this, one, two, three, four. <Right> And you don't have it. There's nothing like that. There's no, as far as I can see, unless I'm missing it, there's no framework, unless you can show me one.

S: Um, so do you think that by adding some kind of sentence that said, that had that?

T: Well, if you can add the sentence and have it have that, that would be good. Yeah...now...what the connections are from section to section, I'm not sure...the convention sorta demands that you gotta have some kind of order. What is the order?...How does it fall together?

S: ....I just need the connecting sentences....

Throughout this conference, more than anything else, the tutor ignores the student's resistance and focuses primarily on teaching her to get along, to "master" the conventions of academic discourse. This "mastering," is what is privileged by Bruffee's social constructionist thecry and what is meant by "understanding." The difficulty with this "understanding" is that in ignoring the student's resistance, it too is an illusion. The tutor starts here by asking what the "principle of organization" is. When this

strategy doesn't get much of a response, he spells things out for her--you know "one, two, three, four." When this doesn't get him very far either, he tries a barrage of negatives: "You don't have it. There's nothing like that. There's no framework." This seems to work better than his earlier attempts. The student is thinking about adding a sentence to her paper. Now that he has a toehold, he pushes further, this time invoking his authority to cite the "rules" of the discourse: "The convention sorta demands that you gotta have some kind of order." With this invocation, the student concedes, "I just need the connecting sentences."

On one level, these two do reach consensus. They agree that she will write a few transitional sentences. But--as with the student's "understanding" and sense of control--this consensus is an illusion. This is most evident, I think, in that once the student decides what she is going to do, she first asks the tutor's permission to do it.

Let's return for a moment to Lunsford's and Young's claims for the social constructionist model of collaboration. Here is Lunsford:

> "Collaboration aids in problem finding as well as problem solving; collaboration aids in learning abstractions; collaboration aids in transfer and assimilation; it fosters interdisciplinary thinking; collaboration leads

> not only to sharper more critical thinking, but to deeper understanding of others; collaboration leads to higher achievement; collaboration promotes excellence."

Here is Art Young: "Collaboration rejects traditional hierarchies; and goes deeply against the grain of education in America." It is, he says, "subversive."

Maybe. In this conference, the model of collaboration is that of "mastery" and "consensus." The difficulty is that in following this model, the student's resistance is silenced. In this silencing, the student is rendered powerless. Instead of genuine consensus then, there is only illusion. What we are left with is the need for a view of collaboration that allows for resistance. But resistance alone is not enough. We need a view that privileges resistance--but that then moves beyond resistance--that focuses as Spellmeyer says on the "critical interanimation" between ourselves and the larger world, a view that far from silencing contradiction sees it as a starting point, a view that forces us to keep talking about our differences until we find, as Spellmeyer says, "some common grounds for agreement--grounds sufficiently complex to be agreeable to us both" (43).